

## Nutrition

This is probably the most important thing to consider when looking after pet rabbits. A large proportion of the veterinary problems we see in rabbits are related to improper feeding which leads to dental disease, gut disorders, and obesity.

Rabbits have a very high requirement for dietary fibre, and have a 'double digestion' system, whereby food material goes through the digestive system twice. They pass two different sorts of droppings: caecotrophs (sticky faeces), which are usually eaten directly from the anus, and hard, pelleted droppings. If the rabbits do not eat the first faeces (eg due to obesity, dental problems, arthritis etc..) then dietary issues can arise.

Rabbit diets should be high in fibre, low in fat, starch and sugars with a moderate protein level, and with an abrasive action on the teeth. The ideal food is grass and hay! These alone however, are not usually practical in a home setting, and so supplementary rabbit foods can be offered.

Muesli-type rabbit mixes are not recommended as these are generally low in fibre and allow selective eating, whereby the rabbit will choose which bits to eat. We recommend a pelleted diet as each pellet is the same, ensuring they eat a correct balanced diet. These should still be considered 'supplementary' in that the majority (80%) of the diet should be fresh good quality hay, plus leafy greens and vegetables such as broccoli, cabbage, celery, and chard. Fruit and root vegetables such as carrots and parsnips, should be given as occasional treats only due to being high in sugars which can lead to dental problems as well as upsetting the digestive system.

Rabbits' teeth grow constantly and need to be worn down by chewing. If rabbits do not have the opportunity to chew and grind down high fibre foods such as hay and grass, then the teeth will

wear abnormally and mouth pain will result due to sharp edges rubbing against the tongue and cheeks. Dental treatment can help, but once dental disease progresses, regular treatment is necessary and even then the problem can get worse over time.

Lack of dietary fibre will also lead to boredom (not spending as much time chewing) and gut problems such as gut stasis (fibre is needed to keep the gut moving). If a rabbit stops eating for as little as twenty four hours, veterinary attention should be sought as serious gut issues can ensue. Diets should not be changed suddenly for the same reason – any changes should be made very gradually over one to two weeks.



Low fibre and high starch and sugary diets can lead to obesity – very common in pet rabbits. This will have knock-on effects with a higher risk of heart and joint disease, development of sores on the rabbit's hindpaws, difficulty in eating caecotrophs, leading to more nutritional problems, the risk of fly-strike and so on.

Fresh clean water should always be provided, either in a dropper bottle or bowl. Care should be taken to make sure that this does not freeze if outdoors during the winter. Recent research has shown that rabbits prefer to drink from bowls rather than bottles, so bowls may be better in terms of maintaining hydration, as long as they can be kept clean.



We recommend you join your rabbit onto our 'gold standard' Pet Health Club.



# Care of your Rabbit

A guide to help care for your rabbit



[www.myfamilyvets.co.uk](http://www.myfamilyvets.co.uk)



# Care of your rabbit

## Neutering

Young rabbits reach sexual maturity between four and six months of age (small breeds earlier than large breeds) and so neutering is recommended from four months of age.

Neutering can:

- Greatly assist with litter training
- Help to improve temperament, reducing aggression towards people and other rabbits
- Reduce unwanted sexual behaviour
- Prevent certain diseases and cancers

Please discuss re introduction of males to community groups post neutering.



## Fly-Strike

Sadly, every year we see cases of fly-strike in rabbits. This is where blowflies lay their eggs on the rabbits, usually attracted by faecal matter or wounds, particularly in hot weather. These quickly (often in twelve hours or so) hatch out into maggots which burrow their way under the rabbit's skin and internally. If not treated early, this can lead to shock and death.

Rabbits should be checked twice daily, particularly around their rear end and especially if they are prone to faecal soiling (e.g. if obese, with dental problems, arthritis etc) or have known wounds. Hutches and enclosures should be cleaned out very regularly, especially in warm weather.

Using a spot-on called 'Rearguard', available from veterinary practices, can prevent fly-strike. This is applied to the rabbit's neck and back, which stops fly eggs from developing and hatching for ten weeks after dosing.

## Vaccination

There are two serious diseases that we can vaccinate rabbits against.

### • Myxomatosis

This is a virus spread by blood-sucking insects such as fleas and mosquitoes. It causes swellings around the face, eyes, lips and ears leading to eventual blindness, disorientation and death. There is a very low survival rate. Indoor rabbits are still at some risk.

### • Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD)

This is a virus spread either directly between rabbits or via indirect means such as shoes or clothing. As a result, indoor and outdoor rabbits can be at risk. It causes internal bleeding and is usually rapidly fatal.

A combined vaccination is available which covers both diseases for one year with a single injection. This can be given from five weeks of age.

The nature and pattern of this disease is changing in the UK, new vaccines may soon be available and your vet will advise in due course.



## Companionship and behaviour

Rabbits are very social animals and ideally should not be kept alone (apart from possibly indoor rabbits which get lots of attention and interaction from the owner). Rabbits should not be kept with guinea pigs as they may fight, plus the different species have different feeding requirements. The best combination is a neutered male and a neutered female rabbit. Un-neutered rabbits are likely to fight.

Rabbits are intelligent pets and require a lot of stimulation. They love toys such as tubes and pipes to run through, small boxes to climb onto and so on.

Willow toys can be useful as they are safe to chew. They enjoy digging, running and jumping and it is important to allow them to express these normal behaviours.

We recommend regular, careful handling of rabbits to allow them to get used to people. Care should be taken to support their rear end when picking them up. Never pick a rabbit up by their ears. Take care not to lift them too far from the ground as they can jump and injure themselves.

## Housing

Rabbits need space and room to exercise. Many are kept in outdoor hutches, although keeping them indoors is becoming increasingly popular.



Hutch size should allow the rabbit to stand up on its hind limbs and make at least three or four hops in any direction - the bigger the hutch the better! Eating and toileting areas should be separate, but both cleaned out regularly.

The hutch should be secured against predators, sited away from direct sunlight and raised off the ground to avoid damp.

Rabbits like to chew and dig, so if kept indoors, the house should be 'rabbit-proofed'. Particular care should be taken to conceal any electrical wires! All rabbits should have access to a secure, predator-proof outdoor run, minimum size 8ft x 4ft x 2ft.

## Getting on with Insurance

We strongly believe that all clients and their pets benefit from a reliable pet insurance policy, covering injury and illness. We believe that a "lifetime policy" gives your pet the ideal cover required.

Insure your rabbit as soon as you acquire its first vaccination!